



Playing detective...

A day in the life of a cat behaviour counsellor



Cuthbert the confused – a case of feline Alzheimer's. Vicky Halls investigates...

Having had the good fortune to own several cats in their twilight years I admit to a particular affection for elderly felines. There is a quiet dignity about them and a wisdom that comes with age. The wisdom that tells them to get owners up at 3am "just because I can" and that learns to use the 'miaow' as a language to include the phrases "stroke me, entertain me, feed me prawns" and any other number of demands based on a whim or a fancy. Most of us will at some stage willingly fulfill the role of servant to yet another ageing Abyssinian or tottering tortoiseshell.

I was therefore delighted when I was asked to visit Cuthbert and his owner, Sam, as here was an 18-year-old cat that was clearly a much-loved character. Unfortunately my delight was short-lived when I read the veterinary history and the owner's emails. Cuthbert had, in Sam's words, become quite 'odd' recently and she was so concerned that she had taken him to her veterinary surgery for a thorough health check. Her vet had excluded many of the age-related diseases but diagnosed cognitive dysfunction syndrome and referred Sam to me to discuss management at home.

As I suspected, Cuthbert was a delightful cat although the 'wisdom' had been replaced in him with a rather more confused demeanour. I spent some time explaining to Sam the significance of Cuthbert's diagnosis.

The life expectancy of the nation's pet cats has increased dramatically – it has doubled since 1930 to 16 years – but as the geriatric population increases in number, so does the incidence of senility and cognitive impairment. A number of causes for this have been suggested, including compromised blood flow to the brain, increased production of free radicals leading to cell damage and the deposition of 'plaques and tangles' in the brain similar to changes seen in human sufferers of Alzheimer's disease.

What to look out for

The first signs that a cat may be suffering from cognitive dysfunction syndrome (CDS) are predominantly behavioural and this is exactly what Sam observed and found so alarming. Cuthbert had started to be extremely vocal at night: a distressing howl that led to many disturbed nights and comforting cuddles. He had regularly failed to return from his routine evening constitutional, only to be brought back in the arms of a friendly neighbour who had found Cuthbert sitting facing a shed in the corner of her garden, crying pitifully. He had also started to look a little unkempt and suffer from the indignity of the occasional toilet accident. These are all sadly common signs that could indicate a diagnosis of CDS; others include:

- A change in sleep/wake cycle
- Decreased appetite
- Change in social behaviour, eg increased dependency or aggression
- Decreased response to stimuli in the environment
- Reduction in grooming
- Repetitive pacing

Once obvious and severe signs of senility are seen it is difficult to prevent further deterioration. At this time, environmental changes should be kept to a minimum, as senile cats cope poorly with change. I recommended that Sam maintain Cuthbert's food bowl, water, favourite bed and litter tray in stable locations within one room. Cats with CDS that have a history of nocturnal howling usually become significantly less stressed and generally happier when a core area has been created within one room and they are shut into it at night.

Various drugs, diets and supplements have been used to assist sufferers and Sam's vet had recommended a particular diet rich in Vitamin E, β -carotene and Essential Fatty Acids. I suggested that Sam include a Feliway Diffuser in Cuthbert's new room, a plug-in device that emits a synthetic analogue of a natural feline pheromone that promotes a feeling of security and familiarity. I felt that, with a few other practical suggestions, a great deal of understanding and tender loving care, Cuthbert would be able to live out his days in relative comfort.

Vicky Halls is a registered Veterinary Nurse, a member of the FAB's Feline Behaviour Expert Panel and author of several best-selling cat counselling books. For further information regarding these please visit her website: www.vickyhalls.net Vicky also hosts a cat behaviour Facebook Group and you can join in the cat discussions by searching for 'Vicky Halls Cat Behaviour' from within Facebook.





Photo: istocklibrary.com/Ira Bachinskaya

If you don't use it, you lose it!

Evidence suggests that activity and environmental enrichment can stimulate the growth and survival of neurons, thereby delaying the onset of CDS. It is not uncommon for various diseases and age-related deterioration to occur simultaneously and this should always be taken into consideration when planning lifestyle changes in an elderly cat; for example, the incidence of degenerative joint disease is high in older cats so stiffness and a decrease in mobility is often a consequence.

The stimulation you choose should encourage both physical and mental activity. Exercise can be interactive or solitary and take the form of predatory play, exploration of new objects, patrolling or foraging for food. The nature of the activity undertaken should be appropriate for your cat's mobility and provided 'little and often'. Whatever your cat feels able to achieve is beneficial as it still constitutes positive exercise.

If your cat previously spent a lot of time outside, he will still benefit from experiencing familiar sights and sounds. Many cats curtail their activity outside partly through insecurity and pressure from other younger, fitter cats in the territory. If you accompany your cat and take a walk round the garden he will have the opportunity to explore in safety. If you restrict the activity to times when the weather is warm and dry it will further enhance the pleasure. If the great outdoors isn't an option then don't underestimate the joys of looking out of a window but make sure that there is an easy way to access a favourite look-out for the less mobile.

If your cat has a favourite toy then use this to its best advantage, if not, try those toys that appear to have the majority appeal. These tend to be the size of a small

rodent – mimicking the size of a cat's natural prey – and be made from a material that is close to the texture of fur. Larger toys can also be useful to encourage your elderly cat to lie down, grab and kick. This gives important 'range of movement' exercise for stiff hind limbs and is a form of play enjoyed by many.

The cardboard box is a real favourite but the principle may need adapting for the elderly as they may find it difficult to jump in and move around, so a larger box placed on its side may be your best option. Tucking some catnip, biscuits, treats* or a toy in a corner will give your cat a reward for his perseverance. Smaller boxes can be useful too if they are sealed and paw-sized holes are cut into the upper surface. Toys or kibble can be dropped inside and your cat can spend time manipulating the object through the holes with his paw. Commercially-available puzzle feeders can also be used to stimulate the older cat to work a little for his food. Paper bags also provide opportunities for exploration, particularly if they crinkle, but handles should be removed to avoid any accidents as cats can easily get them caught round their necks.

When you next wave that feather on a stick in front of your geriatric ginger, remember it's not only about the body beautiful but a workout for the brain too! ●

*All extra biscuits or treats should be approved by your vet as suitable for your cat

This is a composite of cases where names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the clients involved.